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Blood Ridge

IT WAS 1943, AND THE TIDE OF JAPANESE CONQUEST HAD ENGULFED SOUTH-EAST ASIA TO THE VERY THRESHOLD OF INDIA. THE BLOODSTAINED BANNERS OF THE LITTLE YELLOW FANATICS FROM THE LAND OF THE RISING SUN WAVED IN TRIUMPH OVER VAST DOMAINS. RICH CITIES OF THE ORIENT HAD BEEN RAVAGED AND PLUNDERED BY MEN WHOSE FEROCIOUS BRUTALITY WAS AS BLACK A BLOT AS ANY THAT HAD EVER SHAMED A NATION OR HORRIFIED THE WORLD ...

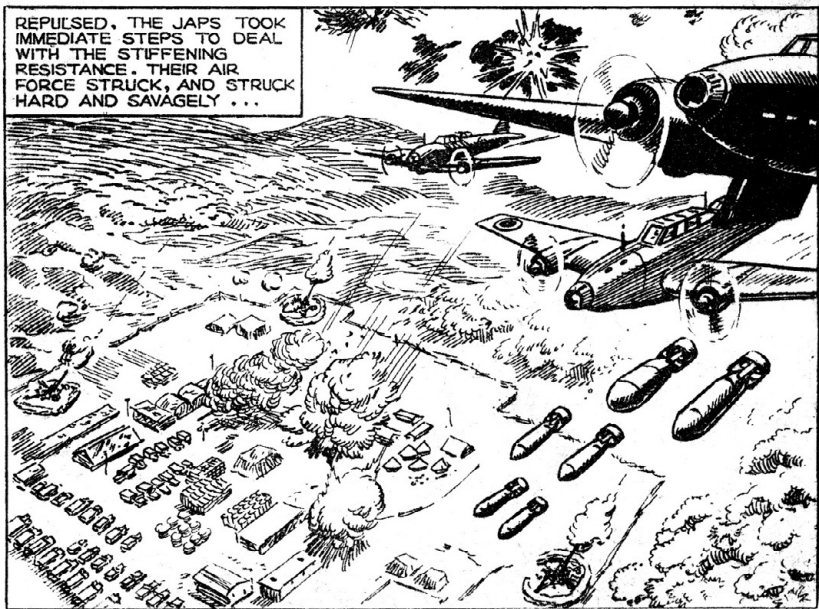


Chapter 1. THE WRECKED BATTERY

BUT IN THAT YEAR A GRADUAL BUILD-UP IN STRENGTH BY BRITAIN AND HER ALLIES BEGAN TO TAKE EFFECT. ON THE BURMA FRONT, BRITISH AND COMMONWEALTH TROOPS BROUGHT THE JAPANESE ADVANCE TO A HALT ...



REPULSED, THE JAPS TOOK IMMEDIATE STEPS TO DEAL WITH THE STIFFENING RESISTANCE. THEIR AIR FORCE STRUCK, AND STRUCK HARD AND SAVAGELY ...



THE MAIN TARGET OF THE JAPS WAS A BRITISH FOURTEENTH ARMY BASE, A SO-CALLED 'ADMINISTRATIVE BOX' WHERE ESSENTIAL SUPPLIES WERE AMASSED -- FOOD, PETROL, AMMUNITION, THE VITAL SINEWS OF WAR ...



ON THE PERIMETER OF THE "BOX", BULLETS LASHED CLOSE TO SERGEANT JIM BLUNT AND A SWEATING, CURSING CREW OF ACK-ACK GUNNERS AS A JAP PEELLED OFF TO DIVE AT THEM ...



Blood Ridge

A ROUND WAS IN THE BREECH, A HAND READY AT THE FIRING LEVER. THE AIR SEEMED ALIVE WITH FLYING LEAD. THE SCREAM OF THE DIVING AIRCRAFT WAS SHRILL IN THE GUNNERS' EARS AS BLUNT BELLOWED FINAL DIRECTIONS ...



THE GUN ROARED DEAFENINGLY, AND JUMPED TO THE CONCUSSION. THE BARREL LEAPED BACK ON ITS BUFFER, AND DUST AND YELLOW SMOKE AND THE REEK OF CORDITE FILLED THE NOSTRILS OF THE CREW ...



THE STRICKEN PLANE SWEEP'T OVER THE GUNNERS' HEADS AND CRASHED SOME DISTANCE AWAY, BLOWING UP WITH A SHATTERING EXPLOSION. BUT JIM BLUNT GAVE HIS DETACHMENT NO TIME TO EXULT OVER THE KILL...



IT WAS HARDLY THE OPPORTUNE MOMENT FOR THE ARRIVAL OF A NEW POSTING -- ESPECIALLY ONE FED UP WITH A LONG JOURNEY FROM A CALCUTTA HOSPITAL'S CONVALESCENT WARD, AND RESENTFUL FOR ANOTHER REASON AS WELL ...



SERGEANT BLUNT BECAME AWARE OF THE NEWCOMER AND LOOKED HIM OVER BRIEFLY, NOTING WITH APPROVAL HIS POWERFUL PHYSIQUE ...

SARN'T BLUNT? I'M GUNNER DODSON. I WAS TOLD TO REPORT TO YOU.

DODSON, EH?
ALL RIGHT, WE'VE JUST LOST AN AMMUNITION-BEARER. YOU CAN TAKE HIS PLACE.



DODSON'S REACTION WAS AN IMMEDIATE PROTEST. COMING SO PAT FROM THE MAN'S LIPS AT SUCH A TIME, IT BROUGHT A GLINT TO THE SERGEANT'S EYE ...

AMMUNITION-BEARER? SORRY, SARN'T, I'M EXCUSED HEAVY DUTIES.



SUDDEN ANGER AND IMPATIENCE WELLED UP IN THE SERGEANT AS HE CAUGHT THE SMUG EXPRESSION THAT FLITTED ACROSS DODSON'S RUGGED FACE, THE IRONICAL QUIRK THAT PLAYED AROUND THE MAN'S MOUTH ...

TAKE A GOOD LOOK AT THOSE SO-AND-SO'S UP THERE! WHAT DO YOU THINK THIS IS -- A PICNIC? YOU DO AS I SAY AND JUMP TO IT! **GO ON, MOVE!**



SOON THE UNWILLING DODSON WAS HELPING TO LUG AMMUNITION BOXES TO THE GUN. IN THE MASSIVE CLAMOUR OF BURSTING BOMBS AND EXPLODING SHELLS HE GAVE BITTER UTTERANCE TO HIS SULLEN THOUGHTS...

'I'LL SEE THE BATTERY COMMANDER ABOUT THIS, SO HELP ME, I KNOW MY RIGHTS, HERE, YOU! CHANGE PLACES WITH ME. YOU AND YOUR PAL KNEW WHAT YOU WERE UP TO, DIDN'T YOU, WORKING IT SO I'D BE MIDDLE MAN! COME ON, I'M NOT FIT, SEE!



THE MILDEST AND MOST EVEN-TEMPERED MAN IN THE BATTERY, DUSTY MILLER OBLIGED HIM WITHOUT A WORD. BUT THE OTHER BEARER, GINGER LAWRENCE, SHOT A BALEFUL GLANCE AT DODSON AND MUTTERED UNDER HIS BREATH.

THAT JUMPED-UP SERGEANT IS GOING TO HAVE A STRIP TORN OFF HIM AFTER I'VE TALKED TO THE MAJOR! YOU SEE IF HE DON'T!

YOU WON'T GET MUCH CHANGE OUT OF MAJOR HADLEY. HE THINKS A LOT OF THE SARGE. WE ALL DO.

GINGER'S RIGHT. JIM BLUNT'S OKAY. I KNOW. HE WAS MY FOREMAN IN CIVVY STREET AND AS GOOD A FOREMAN AS HE IS A SERGEANT.



WHEN THE RAID WAS OVER THE MEN ON THE GUN-SITES ROUND THE PERIMETER WERE ABLE TO RELAX. BUT NOT DODSON. HE APPLIED FOR AN INTERVIEW WITH MAJOR HADLEY, C.O. OF THE BATTERY TO WHICH HE HAD BEEN ASSIGNED.



DODSON WENT INTO DETAILS. THE MAJOR HEARD HIM OUT, THEN EYED THE GUNNER SHREWDLY...



DODSON WAS WRONG. MAJOR HADLEY SENT FOR SERGEANT BLUNT AND DELIVERED A REBUKE, THOUGH IT WAS FAR FROM SEVERE ...



BUT BEFORE THE SERGEANT LEFT THE HUT, MAJOR HADLEY TOOK ALL VESTIGE OF STING OUT OF THE SLIGHT REPRIMAND ...



THE DAMAGE CAUSED BY THE JAP BOMBERS HAD NOT BEEN CRITICAL. AND IN THE FOLLOWING WEEKS AN INCREASE IN BRITISH AIR-STRENGTH LIGHTENED THE ACK-ACK REGIMENT'S TASK AND PROVIDED AMPLE OPPORTUNITY FOR EXTRA GUN DRILL !



DODSON WHIPPED ROUND. RIGHT ENOUGH HE WAS HAVING A CUSHY TIME. REBELLIOUS OVER THE MISCHANCE THAT HAD LED TO HIS TRANSFER, HE HAD NO INTENTION OF PULLING HIS WEIGHT. BUT NO TERRITORIAL WAS GOING TO LAUGH AT HIM ...

WATCH IT, MORRIS, YOU
UNDERSIZED LITTLE WEASEL!
DON'T YOU TRY TO GET
FUNNY WITH ME!



WEARIED ARTILLERYMEN CAME FLOUNDERING IN OUT OF THE HUMID HEAT AFTER THE GRUELING SESSION OF GUN DRILL WAS OVER. THEY FLOPPED DOWN OR STOOD PANTING, MOUTHING MALEDICTIONS AGAINST THE ARMY ...

WHAT WOULDN'T
I GIVE TO BE BACK
IN CIVVY STREET!

ME, TOO!

HERE WE GO!
NOW THE WHOLE
LOT OF 'EM WILL
BE DROOLING
OVER THE HOME-
TOWN THEY
COME FROM!



DODSON CURSED THEM INWARDLY, THESE CITIZEN SOLDIERS WITH WHOM HE HAD NOTHING IN COMMON. HE WAS A REGULAR. HIS FATHER HAD BEEN A REGULAR BEFORE HIM. AND AS A REGULAR, DODSON NOT ONLY DESPISED THESE TERRITORIALS ~ HE HAD EVEN COME TO DETEST THEM!

WHY DID I HAVE TO JOIN UP AS A PART-TIME GUNNER IN THIRTY-EIGHT? IF I HADN'T I'D BE EXEMPT NOW, SITTING PRETTY IN A RESERVED OCCUPATION~ LIKE MY BROTHER ROGER.

ROGER? THAT'S DODSON'S FIRST NAME, TOO. RHYMES WITH DODGER.

YOU LITTLE SQUIRT! I WARNED YOU!



THE BIG GUNNER'S PENT-UP RESENTMENT FOUND AN OUTLET IN THE SAVAGE PUNCH HE AIMED AT THE SMALLER MAN ...

HOLD ON, DODSON. JOHNNIE WAS ONLY JOKING ~

YOU DIRTY GREAT SLOB, DODSON! PICK ON SOMEBODY NEARER YOUR OWN SIZE!



DODSON TURNED WITH BUNCHED FISTS. THIS WHOLE HUT-LOAD OF EX-CIVVIES WOULD BE AGAINST HIM, SURE! BUT HE'D SHOW THEM! HE LASHED OUT, AND THE INOFFENSIVE DUSTY MILLER WENT DOWN UNDER A HAYMAKER...



BEDLAM BROKE LOOSE. THE HUT ECHOED TO A MEDLEY OF SHOUTS AND STAMPING BOOTS. RAGING, DODSON SENT MEN SPRAWLING WITH POWER-HOUSE RIGHTS AND LEFTS...





THE SERGEANT'S BOOMING VOICE RESTORED ORDER. THE MELEE SUBSIDED AND JIM BLUNT LOOKED AROUND AT THE PANTING AND DISHEVELLED MEN. HIS GLANCE SETTLED FINALLY AND FIXEDLY ON DODSON ...

HOW DID ALL THIS START?
DODSON, YOU GOT ANYTHING
TO SAY ABOUT IT?



DODSON MADE NO REPLY. HE JUST STOOD THERE, THE FURY THAT HAD BLAZED IN HIS EYES GIVING PLACE TO TRUCULENCE. THE OTHER MEN WERE EQUALLY UNWILLING TO TALK, BUT JIM BLUNT DREW HIS OWN CONCLUSIONS ...

FROM WHAT I CAN SEE,
DODSON SEEMS TO HAVE DONE
PRETTY WELL IN THIS SHINDY FOR
A MAN WITH A WEAK BACK
AND A WEAK RIGHT ARM!



BLUNT HAD NOT FORGOTTEN HIS FIRST ENCOUNTER WITH DODSON. AND THOUGH HE WAS NOT THE MAN TO BEAR A GRUDGE, HE WAS CONFIRMED NOW IN HIS OPINION OF THE REGULAR. THIS BIG FELLOW WAS NOTHING BUT A LEADSWINGER ...

LISTEN, ALL OF YOU. IF YOU'VE ANY STEAM TO LET OFF, YOU'D BETTER SAVE IT FOR THE JAPS. THE MAJOR'S JUST ISSUED A WARNING ORDER THAT THIS BATTERY'S MOVING INTO THE HILLS, AND WHERE IT'S GOING THERE'S LIABLE TO BE PLENTY OF ACTION!

YOU MEAN WE'RE LEAVING THIS PERISHING ADMIN. BOX ? THAT SUITS US, SARGE. WE'RE ALL BROWNED OFF WITH IT.



AT THE COMMAND POST, MAJOR HADLEY WAS IN CONFERENCE WITH THE OTHER OFFICERS OF HIS BATTERY, BRIEFING THEM ON INSTRUCTIONS HE HAD RECEIVED THAT MORNING AT REGIMENTAL H.Q. ...

OUR ROUTE'S ALONG THIS MOUNTAIN ROAD UP TO A HILL THE NATIVES CALL BLOOD RIDGE, SCENE OF A LOT OF TRIBAL WARFARE AT ONE TIME. NOW IT'S TO SEE FIGHTING OF A DIFFERENT KIND -- BETWEEN BRITISH AND JAPS.

WHAT'S OUR ROLE TO BE, SIR ?



IT WAS CAPTAIN BLAKE, SECOND-IN-COMMAND OF THE BATTERY, WHO HAD PUT THE QUESTION ...

WE'LL GIVE AIR AND GROUND SUPPORT TO INFANTRY ALREADY IN POSITION THERE. A JAP FORCE IS MOVING AGAINST THEM WITH THE OBVIOUS INTENTION OF CLEARING THAT MOUNTAIN ROAD. IF THE JAPS GOT CONTROL OF IT, THE WHOLE FRONT WOULD BE THREATENED FROM THE FLANK.



THE MAJOR WENT ON TO EXPLAIN THAT IF BLOOD RIDGE FELL, THE ENEMY FLANKING-FORCE WOULD SWEEP DOWN AND CUT THE BRITISH MAIN LINE OF COMMUNICATIONS WITH DISASTROUS RESULTS ...

THOSE JAPS HAVE GOT TO BE HELD AT ALL COSTS TILL THE MONSOON BREAKS. BY THEN, IT'S RECKONED, ENOUGH REINFORCEMENTS WILL HAVE ARRIVED HERE TO SECURE THE SUPPLY ROUTE AGAINST ALL THREAT.



BEFORE BRINGING THE CONFERENCE TO A CLOSE, MAJOR HADLEY STRESSED THAT A HARD, SLOGGING JOURNEY LAY AHEAD, WITH THE PROSPECT OF PROLONGED AND DESPERATE FIGHTING AT THE END OF IT ...

WE NEED FIT MEN, TOUGH MEN, AND I'M AUTHORISED TO CALL ON OTHER BATTERIES FOR PERSONNEL TO REPLACE ANY OF OUR CHAPS LIKELY TO CRACK UNDER THE STRAIN. SO WEED OUT YOUR DOUBTFULS, AND LET CAPTAIN BLAKE HAVE THEIR NAMES AS SOON AS POSSIBLE.



THE WEEDING-OUT PROCESS WAS SOON UNDER WAY, AND IN THE COURSE OF IT, SERGEANT BLUNT WAS ABLE TO SPEAK HIS MIND TO HIS SECTION COMMANDER, LIEUTENANT HARRIS.

WE CAN COUNT MORRIS OUT. HE'S WILLING, BUT HE'S JUST NOT FIT. DODSON'S OUT, TOO...

EXCUSE ME, SIR, BUT YOU'RE WRONG ABOUT DODSON. I KNOW HE'S BEEN UNDER THE M.O. EVER SINCE HE REPORTED, BUT I'M CERTAIN HE'S BEEN PULLING THE WOOL OVER THE DOC'S EYES. I'LL TELL YOU WHY...



WHAT BLUNT HAD TO SAY WAS PASSED ON TO THE MEDICAL OFFICER AT R.H.Q., AND AS A RESULT OF AN EXACTING CHECK-UP, DODSON WAS WITH MAJOR HADLEY'S BATTERY WHEN IT TOOK THE ROAD FORTY-EIGHT HOURS LATER...



THE ROAD WAS THE MAIN LINK WITH THE BATTLE-FRONT. PRESENTLY THE COLUMN WOULD TURN OFF ALONG THE ROUTE LEADING TO THE SINISTERLY-NAMED BLOOD RIDGE.

WHEN THE COLUMN SWUNG ON TO THE MOUNTAIN ROAD, TWO NATIVES CAME OUT OF A RAMSHACKLE BAMBOO HUT TO WATCH. SOME OF THE GUNNERS WAVED CHEERFULLY, BUT THEIR SALUTATIONS WERE NOT RETURNED...

WE MUST PASS ON WORD OF WHAT WE HAVE SEEN. IT MAY BE IMPORTANT.



THE GREAT MAJORITY OF THE BURMESE HAD NO LIKING FOR THE JAPS, BUT UNFORTUNATELY, A FEW HAD BEEN INDUCED TO ACT AS AGENTS FOR THE INVADERS. THESE WERE TWO OF THEM.

AND BY MORNING OF THE FOLLOWING DAY, AMONG THE REPORTS THAT FILTERED THROUGH TO THE JAPANESE, THERE WAS ONE CONCERNING THE MOVEMENT OF BRITISH ARTILLERY ALONG THE ROAD TO BLOOD RIDGE ...



THE COLUMN SHOULD BE SOMEWHERE IN THIS AREA BY NOW. PRIMARILY IT IS A TASK FOR OUR AIR FORCE. BUT SEE THAT INFORMATION IS PASSED TO ANY OF OUR INFANTRY PATROLS WHICH MAY HAVE INFILTRATED BETWEEN THERE AND THE RIDGE. **THAT BATTERY MUST BE DESTROYED UTTERLY!**

ABOUT THAT TIME, ONE OF THE VEHICLES IN MAJOR HADLEY'S BATTERY RAN INTO MINOR TROUBLE ON THE LONG, WINDING ROUTE THROUGH THE JUNGLE-CLAD HILLS -- TROUBLE IN THE FORM OF A MUDDY WATER-COURSE, A CHAUNG, THAT BOGGED DOWN ITS WHEELS ...



MEN SPILLED FROM THE LAST TRUCK IN RESPONSE TO THE SERGEANT'S BIDDING AND HE TURNED AWAY, THEN PAUSED, AND WITH A DARKENING BROW, MADE FOR THE BACK OF THE TRUCK...



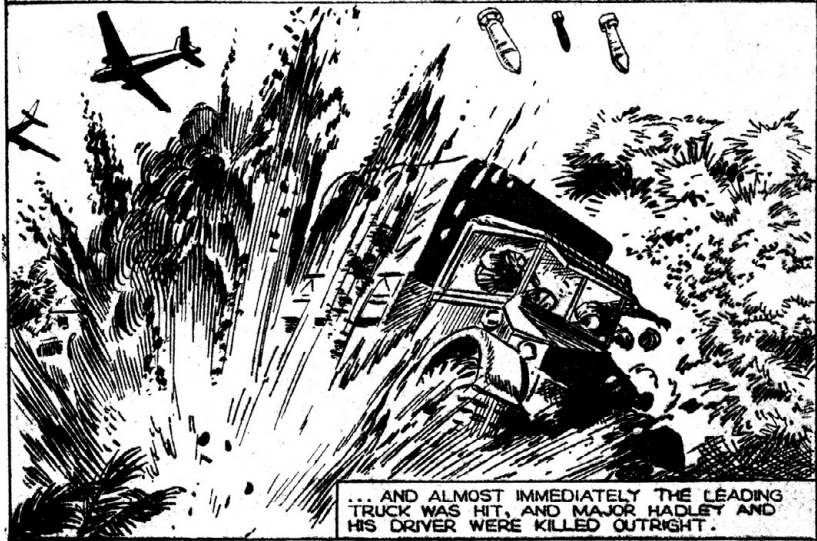
THE SERGEANT'S TONGUE LASHED DODSON INTO RELUCTANT MOTION. BUT IT WAS NOT THROUGH ANY GREAT EFFORT ON THE BIG GUNNER'S PART THAT THE BOGGED-DOWN VEHICLE CHURNED ITS WAY OUT OF THE SLIME ...



WITHOUT FURTHER HINDRANCE THE COLUMN ROLLED JOLTINGLY ONWARD BETWEEN THE HIGH GREEN WALLS OF JUNGLE, GEARS GRINDING AND MOTORS WAILING ON THE STEEPER STRETCHES OF ROAD ~~ UNTIL



NEXT SECOND THE JAP PLANES WERE SWOOPING OVER THE CONVOY. THEIR SINISTER BLACK SHADOWS FLASHED ALONG THE STRAGGLING LINE OF THE BATTERY'S TRANSPORT AND GUNS. THEN THE BOMBS BEGAN TO FALL ...



... AND ALMOST IMMEDIATELY THE LEADING TRUCK WAS HIT, AND MAJOR HADLEY AND HIS DRIVER WERE KILLED OUTRIGHT.

AT THE REAR OF THE COLUMN, GUNNER DODSON SHOWED AN UNACCUSTOMED ALACRITY. DESPITE HIS BULK HE VAULTED NIMBLY OVER THE TAILBOARD OF THE LORRY ...

WE'RE BEING
ATTACKED!
SCARPER!



THE BIG GUNNER HURLED HIMSELF INTO THE UNDERGROWTH. ALL ALONG THE COLUMN, OTHERS WERE DIVING FROM THE VEHICLES WITH THE SAME IDEA IN MIND. BUT THERE WERE MANY WHO DID NOT MAKE IT ...



FROM THE DENSE JUNGLE, MEN WHO HAD TAKEN PRIDE IN THEIR UNIT SAW IT REDUCED TO USELESS, MANGLED SCRAP-IRON AND CURSED ANGRILY, FOR THE SUDDENNESS OF THE ATTACK HAD GIVEN THEM NO CHANCE TO HIT BACK ...

THEY'RE SMASHING THE WHOLE BATTERY TO PIECES! THERE WON'T BE ANYTHING LEFT OF IT BY THE TIME THEY'RE FINISHED!

WHO CARES!
I'M STILL IN ONE
PIECE, AND THAT'S
WHAT MATTERS
TO ME!



BOMBS EXPENDED, THE JAPS CIRCLED LOW AND SWEEPED IN AGAIN. A LOW-LEVEL STRAFING ATTACK THIS TIME, WITH MACHINE-GUNS CHATTERING VICIOUSLY, SENDING STREAMS OF DEATH SLASHING INTO THE JUNGLE'S FRINGES ...

AAAGH!



THAT SHARP, AGONISED CRY WAS THE LAST SOUND YOUNG LIEUTENANT HARRIS EVER UTTERED.

Chapter 2. JUNGLE ONSLAUGHT

AS SUDDENLY AS IT HAD BEGUN, THE RAID ENDED AND AS THE DRONE OF AIRCRAFT FADED AWAY, THE SURVIVORS OF THE BATTERY STUMBLED DAZEDLY FROM THE UNDERGROWTH ...



BUT CASUALTIES PROVED EVEN HEAVIER AND DAMAGE GREATER THAN BLUNT HAD FEARED ...

MORE THAN HALF OF US WIPED OUT, SIR. ALL BUT THREE OF THE GUNS A COMPLETE WRITE-OFF. ONLY ONE VEHICLE WITH AN ENGINE THAT'S SERVICEABLE.

AND NOT ANOTHER OFFICER LEFT BESIDES MYSELF. I DON'T KNOW WHAT WE CAN DO NOW. IF MAJOR HADLEY WERE ALIVE, HE MIGHT COME UP WITH SOME KIND OF AN ANSWER...

JIM BLUNT FELT SORRY FOR CAPTAIN BLAKE. THE SECOND-IN-COMMAND LACKED HADLEY'S EXPERIENCE, DRIVE, INITIATIVE. AND RIGHT NOW HE WAS A BADLY-SHAKEN MAN ...

SIR, AT OUR LAST HALT THE MAJOR MENTIONED WE'D SOON BE PASSING A NATIVE VILLAGE. SUPPOSING I GO FORWARD AND CONTACT THE VILLAGERS. THEY MIGHT BE ABLE TO HELP US IN SOME WAY -- IF ONLY IN LOOKING AFTER THE WOUNDED ...

IT'S AN IDEA. WE'VE NOTHING TO LOSE BY IT-- I SUPPOSE.

BLUNT DOUBLED OFF UP THE ROAD, WHILE THOSE WHO REMAINED DID WHAT THEY COULD FOR INJURED COMRADES ...

IT'S DUSTY... MY PAL DUSTY!

NOTHING YOU CAN DO FOR HIM. HE'S HAD IT, MATE!



MOIST-EYED, AND STUNG BY DODSON'S SEEMING CALLOUSNESS, GINGER LAWRENCE SHOT HIM A BITTER GLANCE. BUT THE BIG GUNNER WAS OBLIVIOUS OF IT ...

WONDER WHAT THE CAPTAIN AND THOSE SERGEANTS ARE NATTERING ABOUT? AND WHERE'S THAT LOUD-MOUTH BLUNT GONE OFF TO? ONE THING'S SURE. WE WON'T BE GOING TO BLOOD RIDGE NOW.



DODSON WAS WRONG, AS HE WAS TO LEARN ON SERGEANT BLUNT'S RETURN.

THE VILLAGE IS JUST BEYOND THE CREST, SIR, AND WE'RE IN LUCK! THE MEN THERE WERE ON A TIMBER COMPANY'S PAY-ROLL BEFORE THE WAR CAME THIS WAY. THEY'VE GOT ELEPHANTS, AND THEY'RE WILLING TO PUT THEM TO WORK DRAGGING WHAT'S LEFT OF THE BATTERY UP TO BLOOD RIDGE!

ELEPHANTS! THEY MUST BE CRACKERS!



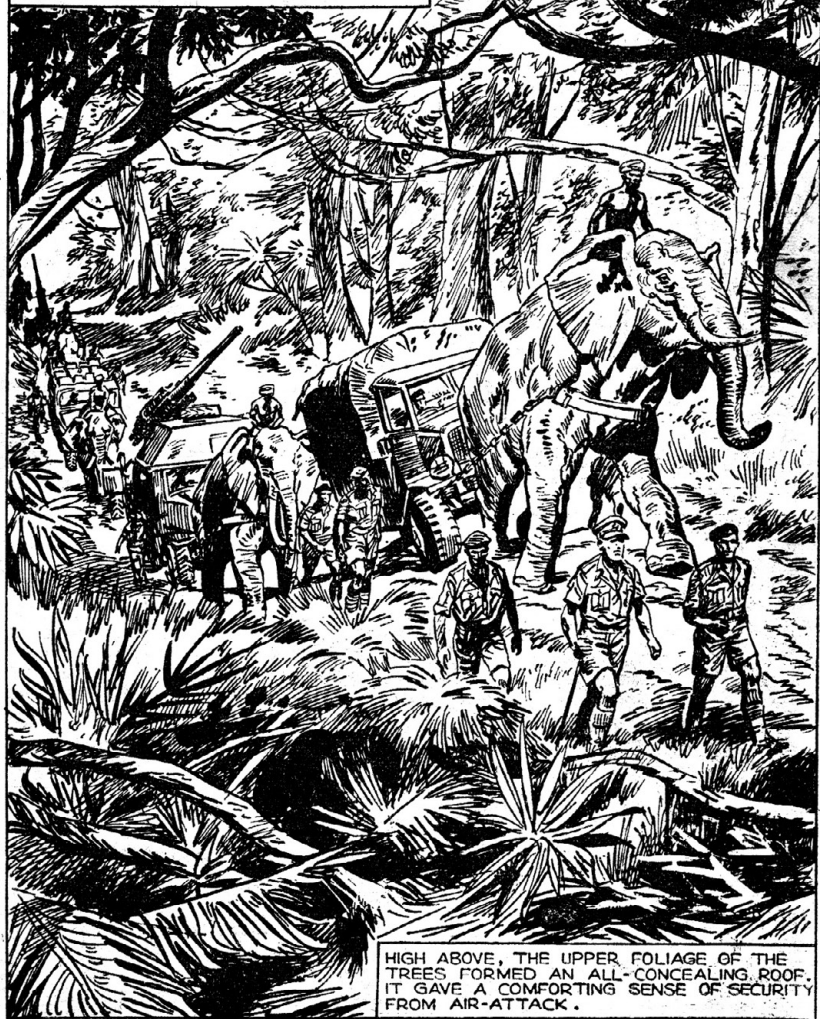
GUNNER DODSON WAS IGNORANT OF THE ASTONISHING CAPABILITIES AND INTELLIGENCE OF ELEPHANTS WHEN TRAINED AS BEASTS OF BURDEN ...

THE HEADMAN SPEAKS ENGLISH, AFTER A FASHION! HE'LL LEAD THE WAY OVER UNMAPPED JUNGLE TRAILS, HIDDEN FROM THE AIR. IT'LL TAKE DAYS TO REACH BLOOD RIDGE, BUT BETTER LATE THAN NEVER, SIR.

AND OUR WOUNDED? THEY'LL BE LOOKED AFTER IN THE VILLAGE TILL ARRANGEMENTS CAN BE MADE FOR THEIR EVACUATION?



BLUNT ANSWERED IN THE AFFIRMATIVE .
AND SO, IN DUE COURSE, THE STRANGEST
OF PROCESSIONS WAS MOVING THROUGH
THE ETERNAL, EERIE TWILIGHT OF THE
JUNGLE'S DEPTHS ...



HIGH ABOVE, THE UPPER FOLIAGE OF THE
TREES FORMED AN ALL-CONCEALING ROOF.
IT GAVE A COMFORTING SENSE OF SECURITY
FROM AIR-ATTACK .

LEECHES THAT FASTENED ON TO MEN'S FLESH AND SUCKED GREEDILY AT THEIR BLOOD, SWARMS OF INSECTS THAT HUMMED ABOUT THEIR FACES, THESE NOW SEEMED THE WORST ENEMIES IN THEIR PATH. BUT BLUNT WAS NOT SO SURE.

OUR RIFLES AND STENS ARE IN ONE OF THE TRUCKS, SIR. WOULDN'T IT BE AS WELL TO ISSUE THEM? JAP PATROLS OFTEN INFILTRATE DEEP BEHIND OUR LINES, AND EVEN IF WE RAN INTO A SMALL PARTY ...

YOU'RE RIGHT, SERGEANT, OF COURSE. SEE TO IT, WILL YOU!

IT WAS HARD GOING IN THAT DARK-GREEN WORLD. THERE WERE TIMES WHEN THE TRACK NARROWED TO A MERE RIBBON AND THE LEECH-INFESTED UNDERGROWTH HAD TO BE HACKED AWAY ...

A FLIPPING LARK THIS IS, I DON'T THINK! I'M A GUNNER, NOT A BLOOMIN' PIONEER! COR, MY OLD MOB WOULD NEVER'VE GOT ITSELF IN A MESS LIKE ---

THAT'S ENOUGH, DODSON! GET STUCK INTO IT AND STOP GRIPING!



EACH NIGHT WHEN DARKNESS CLOSED DOWN AND THEY MADE CAMP, MEN SNATCHED A HASTY MEAL AND THEN SLEPT THE SLEEP OF EXHAUSTION -- UNLESS THEY WERE ON GUARD ...



SURLILY, DODSON MOVED OFF ACROSS THE MOONLIT CLEARING ...

AND SEE YOU KEEP YOUR EYES PEELED AND YOUR EARS PINNED BACK, DODSON!

AH, SHUT YOUR BIG MOUTH! SAVE IT FOR YOUR TERRIERS! I WAS DOING GUARD DUTY WITH REAL SOLDIERS WHILE YOU AND THIS MOB WERE PLAYING AT BEING GUNNERS IN YOUR SPARE TIME ... A BUNCH OF FACTORY-HANDS, SHOP-ASSISTANTS AND FLIPPING PEN-PUSHERS!

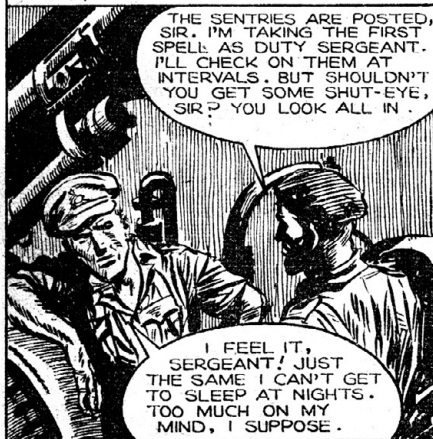


SERGEANT BLUNT COULD NOT READ DODSON'S THOUGHTS, BUT HE HAD NOTED -- AS HE HAD NOTED MANY TIMES -- THE AIR OF SULLEN HOSTILITY WHICH SEEMED TO RADIATE FROM THAT HEAVILY-MUSCLED BODY ...

WHAT MAKES THAT BIG BLOKE TICK P A MISFIT IF EVER I SAW ONE, AND WITH AN OUTSIZE CHIP ON HIS SHOULDER. HE SEEMS TO HAVE A GRUDGE AGAINST EVERYBODY, NOT ONLY ME. BUT WHY? HEAVEN KNOWS, THE LADS IN THE BATTERY ARE A GOOD CROWD, EASY TO GET ALONG WITH.



THE N.C.O. TURNED AND SOUGHT OUT CAPTAIN BLAKE TO REPORT TO HIM. HE FOUND THE CAPTAIN LEANING WEARILY AGAINST ONE OF THE GUNS ...



AS THE NIGHT WORE ON, THERE WAS ONE MAN WHO FOUND HIMSELF UNABLE TO COMBAT SLEEP. A MAN WHOSE RESPONSIBILITY IT WAS TO STAY ALERT ... GUNNER DODSON.



AND WHILE DODSON SLEPT AT HIS POST, A FILE OF MEN GLIDED TOWARDS THE CLEARING ... SHADOWY FIGURES, SILENT AS PHANTOMS ...



THE JAP PATROL PASSED CLOSE TO THE 'SLUMBERING' SENTRY WITHOUT SEEING HIM. THEIR EYES WERE FIXED GREEDILY ON THE BRITISH ENCAMPMENT IN THE OPEN GROUND BEFORE THEM...

WE WILL KEEP SILENT UNTIL WE ARE AMONG THOSE BRITISH AND THE BURMESE WHO ARE WITH THEM. THEN IT WILL BE ALL TOO EASY, EVEN THOUGH WE ARE FEW IN NUMBER. REMEMBER, NO ONE IS TO OPEN FIRE UNTIL I GIVE THE ORDER.



THE CAMP WAS AT THE ENEMY'S MERCY -- A SUDDEN ONSET, AND THE GUNNERS AND THEIR NATIVE HELPERS MUST SURELY BE SLAUGHTERED LIKE SHEEP. BUT ONE MAN WAS NOT SLEEPING -- JIM BLUNT WAS ON THE POINT OF MAKING A TOUR OF INSPECTION...

JAPS!
THEY MUST HAVE
SLIPPED PAST THAT
BIG OAF DODSON!



THE SERGEANT CLAPPED HIS STEN GUN TO HIS SHOULDER AND ITS VIOLENT CLATTER SHATTERED THE SILENCE. THREE OF THE ENEMY WERE SCYTHED DOWN IN THAT FIRST BURST OF FIRE ...



NEXT SECOND THE CLEARING WAS IN A TURMOIL. MEN SCUTTLED FROM BIVOUACS, SPRANG UP FROM THE GROUND, SCRAMBLED FROM TRUCKS. STEALTH ABANDONED, THE JAPS RUSHED FORWARD WITH FIENDISH YELLS -- YELLS THAT JERKED DODSON OUT OF A DREAM-WORLD INTO STARK, FRIGHTENING REALITY ...



THERE WAS STILL EVERY CHANCE OF THE GUNNERS BEING MASSACRED BEFORE THEY COULD ORGANISE FOR DEFENCE. BUT THE STARTLING CACOPHONY OF SOUND STAMPED THE ELEPHANTS AND, TRUMPETING WILDLY, THEY SURGED BACK AND FORTH ACROSS THE CLEARING IN MONSTROUS PANIC ...



THE RAMPAGING BEASTS AT LENGTH BATTERED A WAY OF ESCAPE FROM THE CLEARING. BUT THE DIVERSION THEY HAD CAUSED HAD GIVEN SERGEANT BLUNT AND CAPTAIN BLAKE TIME TO RALLY THE GUNNERS ...



THE JUNGLE ECHOED AND RE-ECHOED TO THE CRACK OF RIFLES AND THE STACCATO RATTLE OF AUTOMATIC WEAPONS. IN SECONDS, THERE WERE ONLY TWO JAPS LEFT ALIVE ...



FROM THE JUNGLE'S EDGE, DODSON SAW THE TWO FUGITIVES. A GLINT OF SAVAGE ANTICIPATION CAME INTO HIS EYES AS HE MOVED TO INTERCEPT THEM ...



THE JAP OFFICER'S GLITTERING BLADE
HISSED THROUGH THE AIR IN A WILD,
MURDEROUS SWEEP, AIMED AT THE BIG
GUNNER'S NECK ...



AS THE ENEMY OFFICER FELL LIFELESS,
DODSON WHIPPED BACK THE BOLT OF
HIS RIFLE AND RAMMED ANOTHER
CARTRIDGE INTO THE BREECH ...



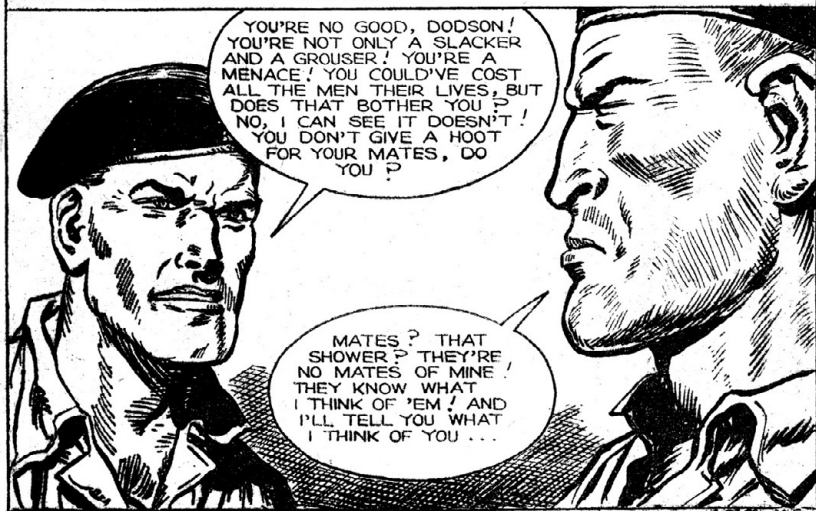
DODSON BECAME AWARE THAT THE BLOOD WAS POUNDING IN HIS VEINS WITH EXCITEMENT. IT WAS A PLEASURABLE SENSATION. HE LOOKED DOWN WITH GRIM SATISFACTION AT HIS HANDWORK, NOT SEEING BLUNT APPROACHING ...



STARTLED, THE BIG GUNNER LIFTED HIS GLANCE ...



GONE WAS DODSON'S SELF-SATISFACTION OF A MOMENT BEFORE. NOW HE STOOD WITH LOWERING GAZE, HATING BLUNT BECAUSE HE KNEW THE SERGEANT WAS RIGHT ... HATING HIM WITH AN INTENSITY OF EMOTION THAT BUILT UP TILL IT WAS AT BURSTING-POINT ...



DODSON LOST CONTROL OF HIMSELF. A TORRENT OF INSULT AND INVECTIVE POURED FROM HIM AND, BLAZING, HE ENDED IT WITH AN UGLY THREAT...

AND I'LL TELL YOU SOMETHING ELSE! IF I EVER RUN ACROSS YOU IN YOUR PRECIOUS CIVVY STREET WITHOUT THE PROTECTION YOUR STRIPES GIVE YOU, I'LL MASH YOU TO A PULP!



IT WOULD HAVE BEEN EASY TO PUT DODSON ON A CHARGE, A DEADLY-SERIOUS CHARGE. IT WOULD HAVE BEEN CORRECT MILITARY PROCEDURE AT THAT, BUT BLUNT TOOK A DIFFERENT COURSE...

DODSON, I COULD GET YOU COURT-MARTIALED ~NOT JUST FOR THE NAMES YOU'VE CALLED ME, BUT FOR NEGLIGENCE OF DUTY IN THE FACE OF THE ENEMY. BUT CAPTAIN BLAKE'S GOT ENOUGH ON HIS PLATE WITHOUT ADDING TO HIS WORRIES, SO I'M HANDLING THIS SITUATION MYSELF!



STEADFASTLY, THE SERGEANT MARCHED INTO THE JUNGLE'S DEPTHS WITH THE BIGGER MAN UNTIL THEY WERE OUT OF EARSHOT OF THE ENCAMPMENT...

FORGET MY TAPES, DODSON. I'M GIVING YOU THE CHANCE TO USE THOSE HAM-SIZE FISTS OF YOURS. AND WHATEVER HAPPENS, IF THERE'S ANY COME-BACK I'LL TAKE THE RAP AND SAY I PROVOKED YOU INTO A FIGHT!

THAT SUITS ME FINE ~MISTER BLUNT!



THEY FACED UP TO EACH OTHER, AND DODSON SWUNG THE FIRST PUNCH. IT WAS AN IMMENSE BLOW THAT HAD ALL HIS BEEF BEHIND IT ... DELIVERED WITH THE BRUTE FORCE AND CONTEMPTUOUS CONFIDENCE OF A MAN WHO HAD NEVER YET MET HIS MATCH ...



... BUT THEN DODSON HAD NEVER MET SOMEONE WHO COULD COUNTER SHEER BULK WITH RINGCRAFT!

THE BIG GUNNER STUMBLED AWAY, A HAND CLUTCHING MOMENTARILY AT HIS MIDRIFF. YET HE WAS QUICK TO RECOVER, AND AGAIN HE UNLEASHED A WILD SWING ...



THE SERGEANT'S BUNCHED KNUCKLES SMACKED HOME ON DODSON'S JAW -- WITH AN IMPACT THAT SWEEPED HIM OFF HIS FEET AND HURLED HIM BACKWARDS INTO THE SLIMY WATERS OF THE NEARBY CHAUNG ...



DODSON HEAVED HIMSELF OUT OF THE CHAUNG AND CHARGED AT BLUNT LIKE A WILD BULL. BUT HE MIGHT HAVE BEEN LASHING OUT AT A SHADOW, SO ELUSIVE WAS THE FIGURE OF HIS OPPONENT... ONLY THIS SHADOW COULD HIT BACK!



DODSON WAS REELING AND BLUNT SAILED INTO HIS MAN, THE COMPLETE MASTER -- AS HE HAD BEEN BEFORE THE WAR IN A STRING OF AMATEUR CONTESTS THAT HAD WON HIM A MEASURE OF LOCAL FAME ...



AND UNDER THE BATTERING OF A RELENTLESS TWO-FISTED ONSLAUGHT, DODSON WAS BOLSTERED ONLY BY HIS UNWILLINGNESS TO ACCEPT THE HUMILIATION OF DEFEAT.

BUT THERE WAS A LIMIT
TO THE PUNISHMENT A MAN
OF EVEN HIS STRENGTH AND
STAMINA COULD TAKE ...



AND THEN THE BIG GUNNER SAW SOMETHING THAT
ALMOST MADE HIM FORGET THE PAIN OF HIS HURTS...
AND HE UTTERED A STRANGLERED CRY OF FEAR ...



JIM BLUNT SPUN IN THE DIRECTION INDICATED BY DODSON'S TREMBLING HAND AND AS HE SAW THOSE SAVAGE-LOOKING FACES, HE INSTINCTIVELY STOOPED TO SNATCH UP HIS STEN GUN ...

YOU! BRITISH SOLDIER!
WE NAGA! BRITISH NAGA--
FINE FRIEND! JAPANESE
SOLDIER-- NO GOOD!

NAGAS! IT'S ALL RIGHT,
DODSON. I'VE HEARD ABOUT
THESE HILLMEN. THEY'RE
HEAD-HUNTERS, BUT THEY'RE
ALL FOR US. THEY HATE THE
JAPS-- COLLECT THEIR
HEADS WHENEVER THEY CAN,
SO I'VE BEEN TOLD.



MEANWHILE, BACK IN THE CLEARING WHERE THE REMNANTS OF THE BATTERY HAD MADE CAMP FOR THE NIGHT, CAPTAIN BLAKE WAS FACED ONCE AGAIN WITH A TRANSPORT PROBLEM. IT SEEMED BEYOND SOLUTION ...

THOSE STAMPEDING
ELEPHANTS SAVED US. NO
DOUBT OF THAT. BUT IT'S
EQUALLY SURE WE'VE SEEN THE
LAST OF THEM AND THEIR
DRIVERS. THAT MEANS WE'VE
LOST OUR ONLY CHANCE OF
REACHING BLOOD RIDGE WITH
OUR GUNS AND AMMUNITION.



BLUNT HAD GOT THEM OUT OF A FIX BEFORE. BUT NOW WHAT ELSE WAS THERE TO DO BUT ABANDON THE REMAINING GUNS AND TRUCKS WITH THE EXCEPTION OF THE ONE VEHICLE ABLE TO MOVE UNDER ITS OWN POWER?

INCIDENTALLY,
WHERE IS
SERGEANT BLUNT?



LAST I SAW OF HIM
HE WAS OVER THERE WITH
DODSON, SR. IT SOUNDED
AS IF BLUNT WAS TEARING
A STRIP OFF HIM. I HAVEN'T
NOTICED EITHER OF THEM
AROUND SINCE.

AT THAT MOMENT BLUNT AND DODSON SHOWED UP WITH THE NAGAS WITH THE NEWS THAT, THANKS ONCE MORE TO THE FRIENDLY CO-OPERATION OF A NATIVE HEADMAN, HELP WAS TO BE PROVIDED FOR CAPTAIN BLAKE AND HIS GUNNERS ...

THAT ONE'S OFF TO BRING ALL THE MEN IN HIS TRIBE, ENOUGH TO HELP US MOVE GUNS AND TRANSPORT. THESE OTHERS ARE CUTTING DOWN THE TOUGHEST VINES TO SERVE AS ROPES.

WHAT HAPPENED TO DODSON'S FACE? NO, DON'T ANSWER THAT. I SHOULDN'T HAVE ASKED. I'VE A PRETTY GOOD IDEA, ANYWAY.

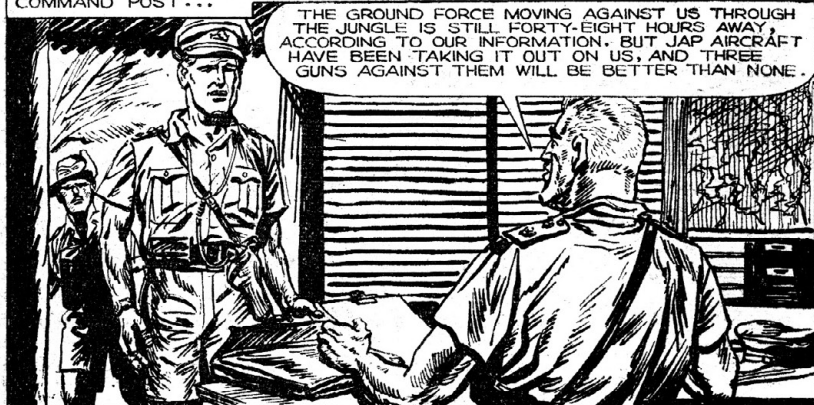


AT CRACK OF DAWN THE GUNNERS SET OUT AGAIN WITH THEIR NEW-FOUND NATIVE ALLIES ...



Chapter 3. OPEN SIGHTS

THEY WERE TWO DAYS' MARCH FROM BLOOD RIDGE, TWO DAYS THAT TESTED THEM TO THE UTMOST, BUT AT LONG LAST THEY REACHED THEIR OBJECTIVE, WHERE BLAKE MADE CONTACT WITH THE INFANTRY'S C.O. IN A MAKESHIFT COMMAND POST...



THE GUNS WERE SITED. THE FRIENDLY NAGAS DEPARTED. MODERN WARFARE WAS NOT FOR THEM. THEY HAD THEIR OWN WAY OF FIGHTING THEIR ENEMIES...



AND NOT LONG AFTERWARDS, BRITISH INFANTRYMEN ON THE FORWARD SLOPE OF THE RIDGE SAW ALL-TOO-FAMILIAR SPECKS IN THE SKY. JAP PILOTS WERE APPROACHING ON A DEADLY VISITATION THAT HAD BECOME A MATTER OF DAILY ROUTINE ...

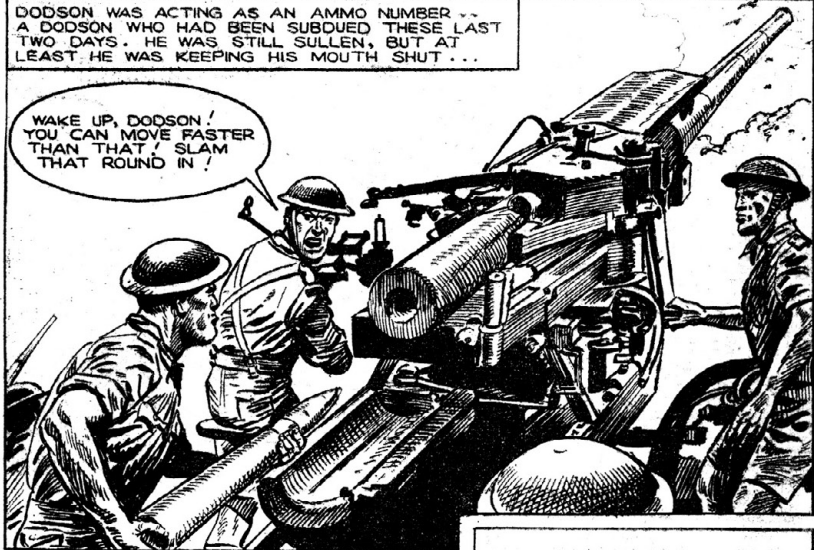


BUT THE BROWNE-OFF INFANTRYMEN IN THE FORWARD POSITIONS WERE DUE FOR A SURPRISE ... AND SO WERE THE JAPS!

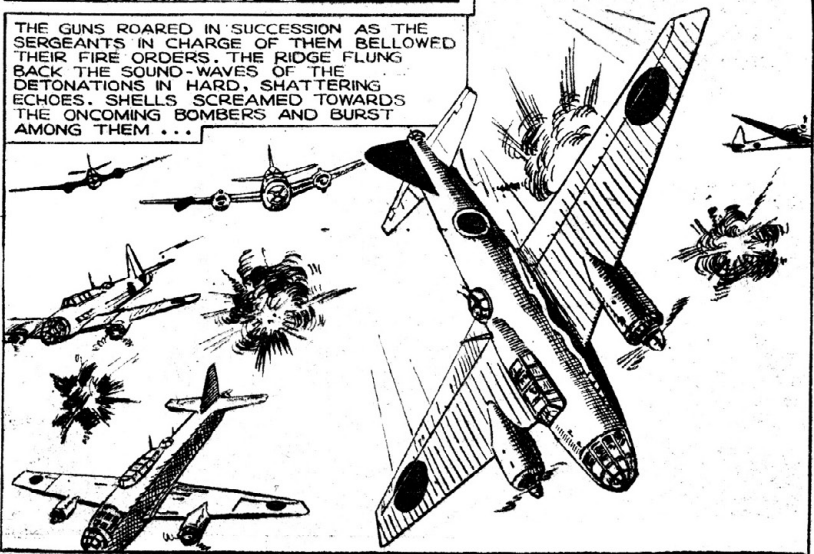


DODSON WAS ACTING AS AN AMMO NUMBER -- A DODSON WHO HAD BEEN SUBDUED THESE LAST TWO DAYS. HE WAS STILL SULLEN, BUT AT LEAST HE WAS KEEPING HIS MOUTH SHUT...

WAKE UP, DODSON!
YOU CAN MOVE FASTER
THAN THAT / SLAM
THAT ROUND IN!



THE GUNS ROARED IN SUCCESSION AS THE SERGEANTS IN CHARGE OF THEM BELLOWED THEIR FIRE ORDERS. THE RIDGE FLUNG BACK THE SOUND-WAVES OF THE DETONATIONS IN HARD, SHATTERING ECHOES. SHELLS SCREAMED TOWARDS THE ONCOMING BOMBERS AND BURST AMONG THEM...



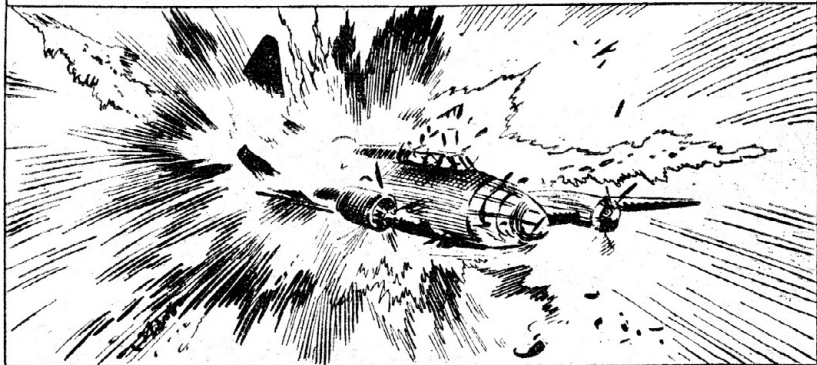
FOR THE INFANTRYMEN WHO HAD LONG ENDURED THE ENEMY'S RAIDS WITHOUT BEING ABLE TO GIVE ANY EFFECTIVE ANSWER, IT WAS A HEARTENING SPECTACLE.



SURE ENOUGH THE BOMBS FROM THE ENEMY AIRCRAFT WERE FALLING WIDE, BUT ONE JAP PILOT BRAVED THE FLAK FROM THE GUNS TO PRESS HOME A SUICIDAL LOW-LEVEL ATTACK...



BLUNT'S BELLOWED INSTRUCTIONS HAD BROUGHT THE GUN ACCURATELY ON TARGET. THE JAP PLANE WAS SUDDENLY OBLITERATED IN A VIVID ORANGE FLASH AND FOR SECONDS AFTERWARDS, BURNING FRAGMENTS OF THE AIRCRAFT RAINED DOWN ON THE RIDGE ...



THE REMAINING JAP AIRCRAFT HAD DROPPED THEIR BOMBS. NONE OF THEIR PILOTS CHOSE TO FOLLOW THE EXAMPLE OF THE ONE WHO HAD DIVED TOWARDS THE RIDGE. THEY TURNED AND MADE FOR THEIR BASE ...

WE GAVE THOSE VULTURES
SOMETHING TO THINK ABOUT!
ONE KILL, AND FROM THE LOOK
OF IT ANOTHER IS LIMPING SO
BADLY IT'S DOUBTFUL WHETHER
IT'LL REACH HOME. OUR BAPTISM
ON BLOOD RIDGE HAS GONE
OFF PRETTY WELL.



Blood Ridge

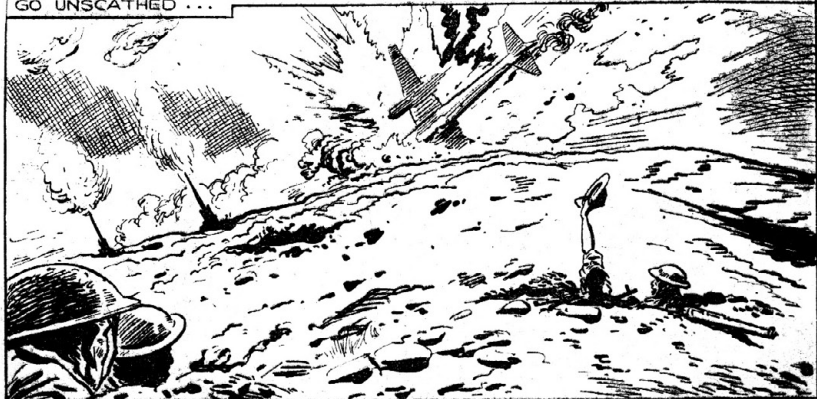
THERE WAS NO MORE ACTION FOR BLAKE AND HIS MEN THAT DAY, BUT ON THE NEXT THE JAPS. FLEW OVER THE RIDGE AGAIN. *THIS TIME THEIR TARGETS WERE THE GUNS, NOT THE INFANTRY ...*



BOMBS WHISTLED EARTHWARD AS THE ARTILLERYMEN FOUGHT THEIR GUNS WITH FRANTIC INTENSITY AND CONCENTRATION...



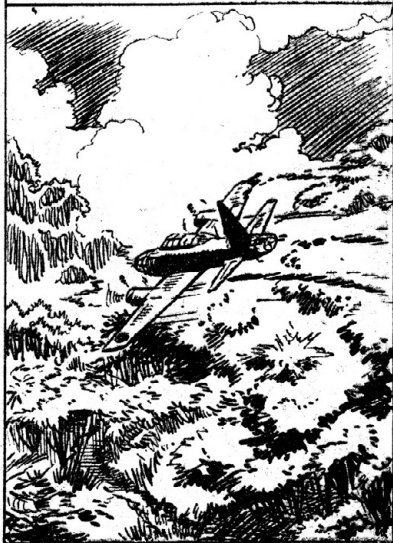
THERE WERE OTHER CASUALTIES AMONG THE GUN-CREWS BEFORE THAT VICIOUS BOMBARDMENT FROM THE AIR WAS ENDED. BUT THE JAPS DID NOT GO UNSCATHED ...



ANOTHER ENEMY AIRCRAFT WAS HIT EVEN AS THE RAIDERS TURNED FOR HOME ...



THE STRICKEN PLANE WENT INTO A LONG, WAVERING GLIDE. IT SKIMMED PRECARIOUSLY ACROSS A RAZOR-BACKED HEIGHT IN THE DISTANCE, AND DIPPED BEYOND THE VIEW OF THE DEFENDERS OF BLOOD RIDGE ...



IN THE JUNGLE BELOW, THE ADVANCE-GUARD OF A JAPANESE FORCE WAS COVERING THE LAST STAGE OF A LONG MARCH THROUGH THE HILLS ...



THE DOOMED PLANE WAS COMPLETELY OUT OF CONTROL. IT PLUNGED HEADLONG EVEN AS THE MEN OF THE ADVANCE-GUARD SCATTERED TO RIGHT AND LEFT. THERE WAS A SHATTERING EXPLOSION AND FOR MANY, IT WAS THE LAST SOUND THEY EVER HEARD ...



THE SOUND OF THAT EXPLOSION REVERBERATED THROUGH THE HILLS. ON BLOOD RIDGE THE LIEUTENANT-COLONEL IN COMMAND OF THE BRITISH INFANTRY LISTENED TO ITS ROLLING ECHOES WITH HIS ADJUTANT...

THOSE GUNNERS HAVE GIVEN A PRETTY GOOD ACCOUNT OF THEMSELVES. I ONLY HOPE THEY DO AS WELL WHEN THE JAPS SHOW UP ON THE GROUND. I THINK I'LL CONTACT BLAKE AND SUGGEST THE GUNS BE BROUGHT FORWARD TO GIVE US CLOSE SUPPORT.



THE GUNS WERE SHIFTED TO NEW POSITIONS BEFORE NIGHTFALL. AT DAWN THE FOLLOWING DAY, OMINOUS ACTIVITY WAS DETECTED ALONG THE JUNGLE'S EDGE ON THE LOWER SLOPES OF THE RIDGE... AND SUDDENLY DEATH ERUPTED FROM THE THICKETS...



JAP MORTARS POUNDED THE UPPER SLOPES OF THE RIDGE IN A BOMBARDMENT OF SAVAGE INTENSITY. UNDER COVER OF IT, SQUAT FIGURES SWARMED FROM THE JUNGLE, YELLOW FACES DISTORTED WITH FEROCITY AS THEY SCREAMED THEIR BATTLE-CRY...



TIGHT-LIPPED, THE DEFENDERS OF THE RIDGE Poured A HOLOCAUST OF DESTRUCTION INTO THE ONCOMING HORDE OF FANATICS!

OPERATING IN A GROUND ROLE, BLAKE'S GUNNERS ADDED WEIGHT OF METAL TO THE SLICING STREAMS OF LEAD THAT RIPPED INTO THE JAPS FROM BRENS AND RIFLES ...



THE ENEMY ATTACK WITHERED UNDER THAT DEVASTATING CURTAIN OF FIRE. LATER IN THE DAY, A SECOND ATTEMPT TO CARRY THE RIDGE WAS LIKEWISE SMASHED WITH HEAVY LOSS TO THE JAPS. THEN NIGHT BROUGHT SEEMING RESPITE ...

I UNDERSTAND THE COLONEL HAS A MOBILE RESERVE READY TO BE THROWN IN WHEREVER THEY MAY BE NEEDED. BUT WE'RE RESPONSIBLE FOR OUR OWN PROTECTION AT ALL TIMES, AND WE'VE GOT TO SECURE OURSELVES AGAINST ATTACK FROM ANY DIRECTION.

I WON'T TAKE A CHANCE ON POSTING DODSON AS A SENTRY TONIGHT.



Blood Ridge

IT WAS AS WELL EVERY MAN DETAILED FOR GUARD DUTY REMAINED ALERT. TOWARDS MIDNIGHT, SUSPICIOUS MOVEMENTS WERE OBSERVED IN A STRIP OF JUNGLE SOME DISTANCE FROM THE GUNS. QUIETLY THE MEN OF THE BATTERY WERE ROUSED, AND TOOK UP POSITION ...



THE JAPANESE WERE BARELY SEVENTY-FIVE YARDS AWAY WHEN BLAKE TOOK THE ITCH OUT HIS MEN'S TRIGGER FINGERS AND RAPPED OUT THE COMMAND...



A GUNNER LEAPT UP AND STARTED AFTER THE JAPS, FIRING AS HE RAN. IT WAS DODSON ... ACTING ON SOME ANIMAL IMPULSE 'PERHAPS... OR BECAUSE THIS WAS AN OUTLET FOR FEELINGS THAT HAD SMOULDERED IN HIM EVER SINCE THE HUMILIATION OF THE HIDING BLUNT HAD GIVEN HIM ...



BUT DODSON HAD SPARKED OFF A RUSH IMPOSSIBLE TO STEM. IN A MOMENT A MOB OF GUNNERS WERE CHARGING TOWARDS THE JUNGLE IN HOT PURSUIT OF THE JAPS ... AND DODSON, WELL AHEAD, CAUGHT UP WITH TWO OF THE ENEMY ...



THE BIG GUNNER WENT DOWN UNDER A BLOW THAT THUDDED WITH STUNNING FORCE AGAINST HIS TEMPLE. THE JAP WHO HAD DELIVERED IT FLED ON THROUGH THE THICKETS. SECONDS LATER, THE PURSUIT SWEEP PAST THE SPOT WHERE DODSON HAD FALLEN ...



IT TOOK SOME TIME FOR BLAKE AND HIS SERGEANTS TO REGAIN CONTROL, BUT AT LAST ORDER WAS RESTORED AND THE GUNNERS WERE HERDED OUT OF THE JUNGLE ...

YOUR JOB IS TO DEFEND THE GUNS, NOT TO GO CHASING AFTER JAPS! THEY MIGHT HAVE PICKED YOU ALL OFF LIKE SITTING DUCKS IN THOSE THICKETS. NOW -- ARE WE ALL PRESENT?

DODSON'S MISSING, SIR.

I SAW HIM TAKE A SWIPE FROM A JAP'S RIFLE BUTT, SERGEANT. THEN I LOST SIGHT OF HIM.

NOT A MAN THERE COULD HAVE SAID A WORD IN DODSON'S FAVOUR, LEAST OF ALL JIM BLUNT. YET IT WAS BLUNT WHO ASKED AND OBTAINED PERMISSION TO MAKE A SEARCH, AND NO ONE AMONG THE PARTY HE LED SHOWED RELUCTANCE ...

AFTER ALL, DODSON'S ONE OF US -- EVEN IF HE'S NEVER ACTED LIKE IT ...

I'M NOT SURE, SERGEANT, BUT I THINK THE SPOT WHERE I LAST SAW HIM WAS MORE TO THE LEFT.

THE GUNNER WAS RIGHT. BUT IN THAT DIRECTION, TOO, REMNANTS OF THE JAP PATROL HAD REORGANISED AND HAD CREPT UP THROUGH THE THICKETS AGAIN. NOW THEY WERE WATCHING ... AND WAITING ... WAITING ...

THEY ARE COMING THIS WAY! WE WILL LET THEM GET CLOSE AND THEN SHOOT THEM DOWN LIKE DOGS!



DODSON WAS LYING A STONE'S THROW FROM THEM, AS OBLIVIOUS OF THEIR PRESENCE AS THEY WERE OF HIS. HE CAME OUT OF THE BLACK ABYSS OF UNCONSCIOUSNESS TO HEAR FAMILIAR VOICES ...

ARE YOU THERE, DODSON?

QUIET! THERE MAY STILL BE JAPS AROUND! SPREAD OUT, LADS, AND KEEP YOUR EYES PEELED ~ FOR SNIPERS AS WELL AS FOR DODSON.



MEN WHO HAD ONLY CAUSE TO RESENT HIM WERE RISKING THEIR SKINS FOR HIM -- THAT WAS THE THOUGHT WHICH PENETRATED TO DODSON'S BEWILDERED MIND. WITH IT THERE CAME A SENSE OF SHAME, ALMOST OF HUMILITY. AND THEN A MOVEMENT NEARBY CAUGHT HIS ATTENTION ...

ONE CHEEP OUT OF ME AND I'VE HAD IT! BUT IF I LET BLUNT AND THE OTHERS COME ON ...



FOR THE FIRST TIME SINCE HIS TRANSFER TO A TERRITORIAL UNIT, DODSON DID NOT THINK SIMPLY OF HIMSELF. HE LET OUT A YELL ... AND IT BROUGHT SWIFT RESPONSE ...



BULLETS WHIPPED AROUND HIM ... AND SLASHED THROUGH THE FRONDS AS HE DUCKED LOW ... THEN HE HEARD THE DEADLY CHATTER OF BLUNT'S STEN GUN AND THE BLASTING UPROAR OF LEE-ENFIELDS, DROWNING THE JAPANESE FIRE ...



IT WAS ALL OVER IN LESS THAN A MINUTE. THE JAPS LAY IN A SILENT, TUMBLING HEAP WHEN DODSON WAS HELPED TO HIS FEET--BY MEN FOR WHOM HE FELT A SUDDEN WARMTH... MEN HE WOULD HAVE BEEN GLAD TO CALL HIS COMRADES NOW...



HE HAD HARDLY NOTICED THE USE OF THE NICKNAME HE HAD SO RICHLY DESERVED. IT LOST ITS STIGMA ANYWAY IN THE DAYS THAT FOLLOWED... HECTIC DAYS OF ATTACK AND COUNTER-ATTACK UNDER SKIES THAT BEGAN TO LOWER AS THE FIRST WINDS OF THE MONSOON SWEEPED OVER BLOOD RIDGE...

A MESSAGE FROM H.Q.! ENEMY TANKS SIGHTED IN THE JUNGLE! THE JAPS MUST HAVE CALLED THEM UP FOR A FINAL ALL-OUT EFFORT TO SMASH THROUGH AND WIN CONTROL OF THE MOUNTAIN ROAD! GET OUT THE ARMOUR-PIERCING SHELLS!



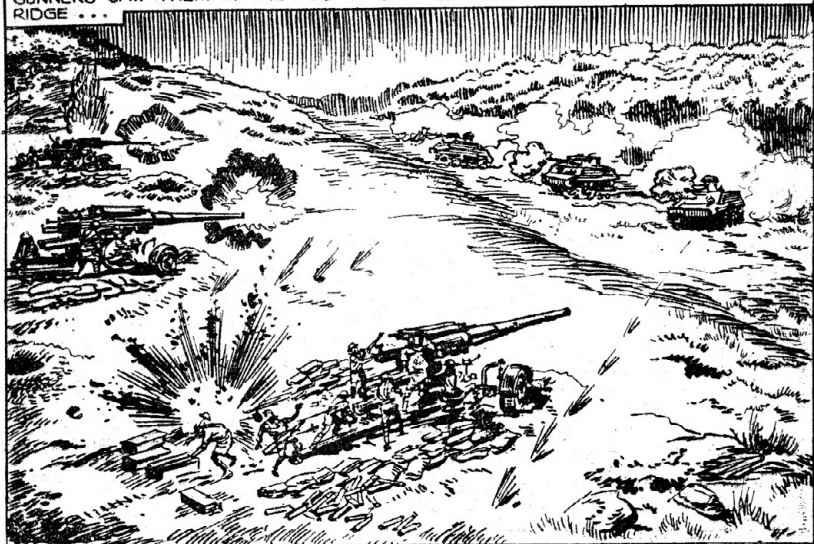
SOON THERE WAS FIERCE ACTIVITY BETWEEN GUNS AND TRANSPORT AS THE CASES OF ARMOUR-PIERCING SHELLS WERE BROKEN OUT. AND NONE WORKED HARDER THAN A MAN WHO SEEMED BENT ON REDEEMING HIMSELF IN OTHER EYES AS WELL AS HIS OWN ...

LOOK OUT,
CHUM! STAND
CLEAR!

I NEVER THOUGHT I'D
LIVE TO SEE THE DAY--
DODSON JUMPING TO IT
WITH THE BEST OF 'EM!



THE GUNS WERE IN READINESS WHEN THE JAPS LAUNCHED THEIR ATTACK, AN ATTACK UNPRECEDENTED IN FURY, SPEAR-HEADED BY LIGHT TANKS. THREE OF THE TANKS SUCCEEDED IN FIGHTING THEIR WAY UPWARD, AND SUDDENLY THE GUNNERS SAW THEM IN THE FOG OF BATTLE THAT HAD ROLLED OVER THE RIDGE ...



A SHELL PUNCHED A HOLE INTO ONE OF THE TANKS AND STOPPED IT DEAD, AND THE OTHERS SOON SHARED ITS FATE. BUT CLOSE BEHIND THE TANKS WERE THE JAPANESE INFANTRY ...

WE GOT 'EM,
SARGE! THEY'RE
BREWING UP!

THE FIGHT'S ONLY JUST
STARTED, LAD -- THE JAPS
HAVE BROKEN THROUGH
IN FORCE!



THE GUNNERS BARELY HAD TIME TO
SNATCH UP RIFLES AND STENS BEFORE
THE SCREAMING LITTLE YELLOW MEN
WERE AMONG THEM IN OVERWHELMING
NUMBERS...



JIM BLUNT'S STEN GUN TOOK HEAVY TOLL
OF THE JAPS AROUND HIS GUN. SO DID
DODSON'S RIFLE-BUTT. THE BIG GUNNER
WAS LIKE A MAN GONE BERSERK ...



RELIEF CAME TOO LATE FOR MOST OF THE GUNNERS ~~~
RELIEF IN THE FORM OF THE INFANTRY MOBILE RESERVE ...



THE JAPS WERE DRIVEN BACK DOWN THE RIDGE, AND AS THE TIDE OF BATTLE RECEDED FROM HIM, SERGEANT BLUNT LOOKED ROUND SOMBERLY. OF ALL THE MEN WHO HAD SET OUT MANY DAYS AGO WITH MAJOR HADLEY, HE ALONE STOOD ON BLOOD RIDGE NOW ...



BLUNT JERKED ROUND, SAW A JAPANESE LIGHT MACHINE-GUN TRAINED ON HIM, AND THREW HIMSELF TO ONE SIDE. EVEN SO, A BULLET THUDDED INTO HIS SHOULDER WITH AN IMPACT THAT KNOCKED HIM FLAT ...



IN ONE SWEEPING MOVEMENT, DODSON SCOOPED UP THE SERGEANT'S STEN AND AIMED IT AT THE JAP ...



THE JAP LAY DEAD. BUT DODSON HAD SUNK BACK, TOO, MORTALLY WOUNDED, WHEN BLUNT PULLED HIMSELF CLOSE TO THE BIG GUNNER...

YOU SAVED
MY LIFE,
DODSON.

I--I NEVER THOUGHT I'D WIND UP DOING THAT, SARGE... BUT I WAS WRONG ABOUT YOU-- AND ABOUT EVERYBODY ELSE IN THE BATTERY... TELLING MYSELF I WAS THE ONLY REAL GUNNER IN IT... ME, A REGULAR... AND ALL THE TIME ANY ONE OF YOU WAS A BETTER GUNNER THAN I'D EVER LEARNED HOW TO BE... A BETTER GUNNER, A BETTER SOLDIER, A BETTER MAN...



THEY WERE THE LAST WORDS OF A MAN WHO HAD FOUND COMRADESHIP AS WELL AS DEATH ON BLOOD RIDGE... UP THERE WHERE THE MONSOON WIND WAS BLOWING AND THE DRENCHING RAINS WERE BEGINNING TO FALL...

WE'VE DONE WHAT WE WERE ASKED TO DO... AND IN THE END, DODSON, YOU DID YOUR SHARE-- AND MORE...



THE YEARS HAVE ROLLED BY. TODAY BLOOD RIDGE IS SILENT, AND FOR ALL WHO PASS THAT WAY THERE IS LITTLE TO RECALL THE PART IT PLAYED IN A DESPERATE CAMPAIGN -- ONE THAT HELPED CLEANSE SOUTH-EAST ASIA OF THE YELLOW FANATICS WHO DREAMED AN EVIL DREAM OF CONQUEST ...



A DERELICT GUN IS THE ONLY REMINDER,
A RUSTING MEMORIAL TO MEN LIKE
GUNNER DODSON WHO FOUGHT AND FELL
BESIDE IT ... MEN WHOSE NAMES AND
FACES STILL REMAIN FRESH IN THE
MEMORY OF ONE WHO SURVIVED ...
JIM BLUNT.

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